INL Deputy Director David Hill was among 30 professionals from Department of Energy and National Nuclear Security Administration labs across the country at a recent meeting for nuclear analytical managers.

Managers meet, share, collaborate in Idaho Falls

By Brianna McNall, INL Nuclear Science & Technology Intern

Materials analysis is required in all kinds of scientific fields.

The capabilities to perform analysis of radiological materials, however, are generally confined to the Department of Energy analytical laboratories that are scattered across the country. The distances between them can make cooperation difficult. Meetings and conferences serve as platforms for collaboration.

That's one of the reasons why nearly 30 managers from DOE and National Nuclear Security Administration labs across the country, along with a few of their international colleagues, met in Idaho Falls this summer for their 30th annual DOE/NNSA Analytical Managers Meeting (DAMM), hosted by Idaho National Laboratory.

At the meeting, managers give "site reports," which allow them to share information on lab capabilities, updates, triumphs and challenges with other managers. It's a chance to line up collaborations, like the new analytical lab website that will enable communication between the different labs. It's also a good way to learn about different programs that other labs have found beneficial.

After being greeted by INL Deputy Associate Laboratory Director Kathryn McCarthy and Steven Bakhtiar, manager of the Nuclear Materials Characterization Department (NMCD), the managers participated in two days of discussion, site reports, and program and technology presentations. The main meeting was followed by a reception at the Art Museum of Eastern Idaho, where Dave Hill, INL's deputy laboratory director for Science and Technology, gave them a brief overview of INL.

Meeting participants shared information about capabilities to perform analysis of radiological materials and toured INL's Nuclear Materials Characterization Department.

It's a chance for managers of groups with analytical capabilities to come together for "benchmarking, networking and opportunities for collaboration," said Bakhtiar.

And as the host of this year's meeting, INL gets to show off its NMCD and analytical lab facilities. Participants spend the third and final day of the meeting touring the NMCD facilities at INL's Materials & Fuels Complex.

But INL had better hide its interns.

A universal theme in the site reports was the lack of available experienced workers. Several managers reported that up to 37 percent of their work force will be eligible for retirement over the next several years. Although new scientists are coming out of college, many of the labs are having trouble figuring out how to give them the knowledge and training they need.

"The ones who have the knowledge are too busy to pass it on," said Savannah River National Laboratory's Robin Young.

Opportunities like INL's summer internship program give students several months of hands-on experience in a lab setting.

"They're able to go in there and see the instruments, run the instruments," said Jeff Giglio, of INL's NMCD. It's just one way of mitigating the decline in experienced lab workers.

Another idea that was mentioned was collaboration between the different analytical labs. At the meeting, the managers were able to advertise their labs' unique capabilities to other DOE managers. For labs that aren't able to expand their capabilities, or have a test that they need to run only once in a while, hiring some work out to other labs could be a simple solution.

Despite the challenges that each analytical lab faces, the managers left this year's meeting with a list of potential collaborators, as well as some ideas for overcoming challenges that, while new to them, have already been conquered elsewhere.

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